



It's best to have a Rabbi. Someone who'll guide you; keep you from making the same, time-worn mistakes. A master to your apprentice. Most occupations allow for such a system: any kind of craftsman or tradesman spends time studying with some cynical old bastard who bitches and swears and makes you sorry you ever wanted to become a plumber or air conditioner repairman or gigolo or chimney sweep or whatever; but, ultimately, prepares you for the work.

This is not the case if you decide your future is in riding the rails. First, old hobos are rare like miracles. Oh, they all look weathered and ancient, but that's from the rotgut hooch and laying their heads down on a bed of straw with the boxcar door open to a warm, star-filled night; and then waking up under a snowdrift with arctic air punishing their lungs. Do a survey at any switch-yard - ask the decrepit looking men slouching around the flaming trash barrel their ages. Odds are you won't hear a number higher than 30.

Second, any 'bo that does manage to collect significant years behind him will be crazy and unreliable. Too many meals drank instead of eaten, too many rough exits from moving trains, too many shots to the head.... No, any hobo who was around to vote for Truman would be useless - less than useless - as a mentor. The right thing to do is avoid those weird old creatures with their unfocused eyes and oddly splotched skin. If you're unlucky enough to climb into boxcar and find one lurking in the corner, almost invisible in the shadows but for the luminous wisps of warm breath meeting cold air, just leave. Jump out. Catch the next one. Do not introduce yourself or sit next to him. And, for God's sake, do not engage him in conversation.

For that allows the madness to seep from his scabbed lips and lay snake-eggs in your own alcohol addled brain.

Laying in the back seat of a Cadillac being hauled in a long box with three other cars by a KC Southern engine pushing through the flat lands of Kansas in the dead of a crisp October night, Virgil reflected upon this very strategy after hearing a loud noise, possibly a shotgun, pop from somewhere out there.

Virgil held his breath for a moment. Released it. Risked sitting up for a moment and inspected the windows and doors, running his hands over them, feeling for a hole.

No. Nothing.

Goddamn that mental old man anyway.

Since he was already sitting, Virgil took another swallow from his bottle of bottom-shelf gin. It went down smooth and warm. Virgil sighed and rested his head against the cold safety glass of the window. He rolled his forehead around, soaking up the cool.

Then he imagined it - coming from somewhere out there in the vast expanse of nothingness. A bullet. Red hot and screaming towards him. Smashing the glass, exploding his head.

Virgil sank down into the seat and held the bottle to his chest, suddenly cold all over.

That stupid, insane old bastard. Virgil had thought he might be somebody interesting to talk to, what with his obvious age and experience. Most 'bos you meet on the rails are either wary of you or specimens you should beware of; maybe exchange a silent nod with them before settling into opposite corners, everyone in the box sleeping with their eyes open. But the old man was so frail and harmless looking; 90 pounds wet and wearing boots with huge eyes in a paper-thin skull. Still, he showed no fear or hesitation when Virgil jumped in the box.

"Hello, son," he'd said after Virgil spotted him in the corner. "Sit a spell."

Son....

Within two minutes, Virgil had cracked the paper of a bottle he'd been hiding in his coat and was sharing it with the old man.

And Virgil never shared his bottles.

Then the old man started telling stories.... That damned crazy old man.

Oh, you wish this train was hauling new cars, do you? You enjoy riding in that comfort, do you? I'll tell you son, that's the Devil's comfort. Those pillowied seats? Yes, and the air warms up nicely when you're tucked in there with a bottle. Well you go right ahead and enjoy those miles, but know now, you're paying for that luxury. And the Devil is writing up the bill.

The price is a bullet in your head. It'll happen. It happens to all the goodfellas think they deserve to travel like a Rockefeller.

Almost happened to me once; that's why I'll never ride in a car again.

Understand this was back in the 50s, maybe it was early 60s, and back then, son.... The cars they made back then? More like houses than cars. We would pile six, seven, eight of us in one of them Oldsmobiles and it would toast up in there just like we were sitting 'round a fire.

A Chevy, I think it was. A monster, not a car. Must have weighed ten tons. All fins and panels and it had this hood ornament that looked like a spaceship from Mars. I was traveling with some of my friends - it was different then. Not every man for himself. Not like today. We had friends then. Anyway, there was one old timer with us, and he was nervous like a whore in church. Right when it was decided we sneak into a car with our bottles, this old timer started complaining. He didn't want any part of riding in that car, but it was cold and we told him if he wanted to share our bounty, he had to join us in the automobile. Or freeze in the box. Not much of a choice, really, so once that train rolled out we all crept into that Chevy and made ourselves at home. But that old timer, he squeezed himself into a little ball and stayed himself on the floor of that car and wouldn't come up for nothing. Oh, we teased him and kicked him a little - well, nudged him with our feet, you know.... But he never lifted his head past the seat.

He was still balled up there in the morning, 'cept there was a hole in his head and his brains splayed out all over the floor. Sure and then I remembered seeing a fire out on the distance as we rolled through the endless country - you know how it is - always something burning in the night when you're a million miles from nowhere. Maybe I even heard shots then, and probably thought it was just stupid, bored country kids practicing their gun skills against a fast moving train under the moonlight. You're nodding your head; you've seen that too, yes?

Every 'bo has. Doesn't mean anything.

Except when you wake up smelling blood from the blown up head of some old timer who caught one of those bullets while you were click-clacking down the line with your friends and a couple bottles.

No. It wasn't stupid country boys. It was the Devil's own soldiers. Demons. They're waiting out there, in the night, in the darkness; rifles ready to take out any hobo thinks he's too good to ride in a box. Thinks he deserve the luxury of a new car.

Oh? Crazy am I? Maybe so. All I can tell you is how it was explained to me.

We were all pretty shaken up about the dead geezer, so we scattered to the wind to avoid any entanglements; but word still got around. Understand it used to be like that. Everything wasn't so.... Isolated back then. Anyway, I was keeping my head down in a yard around Iowa way when another old timer came calling for me. A real Methuselah, this fella. You may think I'm long in the tooth, but this gentleman? I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd told me what flavor cake they had at Jesus's birthday party. Anyway, he caught up with me one night while I was trying to get well after having taken in some bad shine. There I was, in the corner of a garbage shed, shivering with fever; nothing left in my guts but the remains of a stubborn sickness that wouldn't allow itself to be puked out, when this ancient ghoul crawled in next to me. He had a bottle with him, and he put it to my lips and tilted my head back, and that liquid fire did focus my eyes and cleared the cotton from my ears.

And he told me:

"I was a comrade of the man who was murdered that night. And now I must tell you just how close you were to tasting the Devil's breath.

We are, you see, Lucifer's people. Us hobos. Wasn't he the fallen angel? Well. Of men, how much farther can you fall than where we are now?

So. He watches us. He looks after us. And, on occasion, he rewards us -"

At this he gave me another drink from the bottle. I was grateful for it.

"- But he also punishes us when we deign to rise above our place. Just so. And that is why you must never again ride in a new car being hauled by a train.

Padded seats? Airtight doors? No. This is not for us. We are the men of straw beds and drafty box cars. Wet noses and swollen livers. Wooden slats written across our backs. This is the Devil's due, only this. Reach for more and you will catch a packet of lead between your eyes.

Don't ever believe it was an accident. Children playing with guns in the middle of the night? No sir. Next time you see a fire burning in an empty Nebraska field in the darkness after midnight, squint and study the shadows being cast. Are they the shadows of twelve year old boys, clumsily juggling their father's rifles? Or are they more substantial. Muscular. Tall. Full and bulky. Study hard; are those horns on their heads? Isn't that gun held steady and sure, the barrel pointing right between your

eyes?

Never let them catch you enjoying the luxury of a new car again, friend. It will be your last ride."

And with that he crawled way to leave me with the ice-cold worms crawling through my guts, and now my brain.

When I was strong enough to sit up, I found that he'd left the bottle. It was enough to convince me of his sincerity.

Virgil lay with the rim of the bottle resting against his lower lip. His intention had been to continue a slow distribution of gin down his gullet, but while remembering his conversation with the old man, Virgil had zoned out and locked up. Now it was like he'd frozen, eyes glazed, muscles turned to marble. The gin growing stagnant in the glass.

A flicker of light dancing across the roof of the car snapped Virgil from his daze. He sat up, looking for the source. There. From the window. A fire blazed way out in the middle of an expanse of empty land.

Why...?

Virgil's fingertips rested on the bottom edge of the window. His forehead touched safety glass. The fire was huge, flames reaching high into the sky.

Humanoid shadows stood around the blaze. Shadows casting shadows.

But what were those spiky things growing from their heads...?

And why was that one shadow pointing right at him?

Virgil saw another brief flash of light, then heard a popping sound.

The End for Virgil.